Assessment

Forest Plan Revision

Final Introduction and Public and Tribal Involvement Report

Prepared by:

Virginia Kelly, Forest Plan Revision Team Leader
Mariah Leuschen-Lonergan, Forest Plan Revision Public Affairs

for:
Custer Gallatin National Forest

February 16, 2017

Contents

Introduction

A draft of this *Introduction and Public and Tribal Involvement* report was released for public review on November 30, 2016 and feedback was requested by January 6, 2017. The end of this final report includes a summary of the public feedback and how the Forest Service utilized the information it received.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires every national forest or grassland managed by the Forest Service to develop, maintain and periodically revise an effective land management plan (also known as a forest plan) and amend, or revise, the plan when conditions significantly change. The process for the development and revision of plans, along with the required content of plans, is outlined in the planning regulations, often referred to as the Planning Rule. Managers of individual national forests and grasslands follow the direction of the Planning Rule to develop a land management plan specific to their unit that sets forth the direction the national forest will follow in the future management of lands and resources within its boundaries. The current rule is the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (referred to as the "2012 Planning Rule").

National Forest Management Act regulations require that each forest plan be revised every 10 to 15 years (36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219.10). In 2014, the Custer National Forest and the Gallatin National Forest combined into the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The Custer National Forest and National Grasslands Land and Resource Management Plan, dated October 1986, has been amended 34 times. The 1987 Gallatin Forest Plan has been amended 50 times. The now administratively combined Custer Gallatin National Forest is beginning the first phase of a 4-year planning process to revise both forest plans into one plan.

As stated in the 2012 Planning Rule, planning for a national forest is an iterative process that includes an assessment; developing, amending, or revising a plan; and monitoring. These three phases of the framework are complementary and may overlap. The intent of the planning framework is to create a responsive planning process that informs integrated resource management and allows the Forest Service to adapt to changing conditions, including climate change, and improve management based on new information and monitoring. The planning process consists of the following three steps:

- Assessment Phase. The evaluation of existing information, such as relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions, trends, and sustainability, and its relationship to the land management plan within the context of the broader landscape.
- Revision Phase. The updating of information, including identification of the need to change the forest plan, development of a proposed plan and alternatives, consideration of the environmental effects of the proposed plan and alternatives, provision for public review and comment of the proposed plans, provision to object before a proposed plan is chosen, and, finally, approval of the selected plan.
- Monitoring Phase. The continuous observation and collection of feedback for the planning cycle that is used to test relevant assumptions, track relevant conditions over time, and measure management effectiveness.

Location of the Custer Gallatin National Forest

The Custer National Forest and the Gallatin National Forest combined in 2014 into the Custer Gallatin National Forest. The Custer Gallatin now encompasses over 3 million acres in southern Montana and the northwest corner of South Dakota (see Figure 1 on page 4). Stretching over 400 miles from its

westernmost to its easternmost boundaries, the Custer Gallatin is the most ecologically diverse national forest in the Forest Service's Northern Region.

Inside the Custer Gallatin administrative boundary are about 3,423,000 acres, of which about 3,039,000 acres are National Forest System lands. The National Forest System lands are also referred to as the "plan area." The Custer Gallatin consists of several geographically isolated land units extending from the Montana-Idaho border near the tristate corner of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming across southern Montana and into western South Dakota.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest includes portions of 10 counties in Montana and one county in South Dakota. The seven ranger districts offices are located in West Yellowstone, Bozeman, Livingston, Gardiner, Red Lodge and Ashland, Montana and Camp Crook, South Dakota. The Forest Supervisor's office is located in Bozeman. Offices are also located in Big Timber and Billings, Montana.

About the Assessment

The assessment is designed to evaluate and present existing information about relevant ecological, economic, and social conditions; trends and sustainability; and associated relationships to the land management plan. Assessments are not decision making documents but provide current information on select topics relevant to the plan area.

To complete the assessment, the Forest Service evaluated readily available information that is relevant. The term "relevant" means the information must pertain to the topics under consideration at spatial and temporal scales appropriate to the plan area and to a land management plan. Relevance in the assessment phase is information that is relevant to the conditions and trends of the following 15 topics:

1. Terrestrial ecosystems, aquatic ecosystems, and watersheds
2. Air, soil, and water resources and quality
3. System drivers, including dominant ecological processes, disturbance regimes, and stressors, such as natural succession, wildland fire, invasive species, and climate change; and the ability of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems on the plan area to adapt to change
4. Baseline assessment of carbon stocks
5. Threatened, endangered, proposed and candidate species; potential species of conservation concern (SCC); and species of public interest present in the plan area
6. Social, cultural, and economic conditions
7. Benefits people obtain from the Custer Gallatin National Forest plan area (ecosystem services)
8. Multiple uses and their contributions to local, regional, and national economies
9. Recreation settings, opportunities and access, and scenic character
10. Renewable and nonrenewable energy and mineral resources
11. Infrastructure, such as recreational facilities and transportation and utility corridors
12. Areas of tribal importance
13. Cultural and historical resources and uses
14. Land status and ownership, use, and access patterns

15. Existing designated areas located in the plan area including wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, and potential need and opportunity for additional designated areas.

Assessment Structure

The Forest Service has prepared the assessment of existing conditions in compliance with the 2012 Planning Rule. An assessment report was created to summarize 25 individual specialist reports. The assessment report is organized into two main sections. The first section includes the physical and natural resource topics 1 through 5 listed above. The second includes the social, economic, and cultural conditions and uses of the Custer Gallatin listed in topics 6 through 15 above.

Twenty-four individual resource-specific specialist reports in addition to this Introduction Report cover facets of the 15 topics listed above. Together, the specialist reports and the assessment report identify and describe important information evaluated in this phase; the nature, extent, and role of existing conditions and reasonably foreseeable future trends within the plan area and in the broader landscape. Trends may imply a range of changes that are reasonably foreseeable in the future. Statistical analysis is not implied or necessary to identify and describe trends in the assessment phase. Trends may be described in broad terms such as "increasing," "decreasing," or "remaining stable" or may describe the contribution that the plan area makes to ecological, social, or economic sustainability related to the topic.

Best Available Scientific Information in the Assessment

During the assessment, the Forest Service identifies and evaluates the conditions and trends of the assessment topics identified in 36 CFR 219.6(b) and the sustainability of social, economic, and social systems (36 CFR 219.5(a)(1)).

During the assessment process, Custer Gallatin resource specialists used the best available data and science to evaluate conditions, trend and risks. A wide range of relevant, quality data was used, including monitoring reports. The citations used in the individual specialist reports are considered to be the best available scientific information at this time to inform the Assessment. Each resource report identifies information needs.

In addition, Forest Service manuals and handbooks were used when preparing this assessment and can be found at: http://www.fs.fed.us/im/directives/. Individual resource reports cite Forest Service manuals and handbooks within the body of their text and in their dedicated references sections at the end of their respective reports.

Landscape Areas

Because of the diversity and extent of the national forest, the Custer Gallatin was divided into five "landscape areas" for this assessment. The purpose was to construct a more publicly useable assessment for the wide geographic scope of the national forest and its communities. The Pryor Mountains, Ashland District and Sioux District are geographically separated from other parts of the Custer Gallatin. The Greater Yellowstone Area portion of the National Forest System was divided into two landscape areas, one south and one north of Interstate 90.

Table 1 displays landscape area acreage and Figure 1 is a map of the landscape areas. In this report, the Ashland and Sioux landscape areas are often referred to as "pine savanna" while the remaining three landscape areas are often referred to as "montane."

Table 1. Landscape area acreage

Landscape Area	Total Acres (All Ownerships)	National Forest System Acres within Area	Percent of Area in National Forest System Lands
Bangtail, Bridger, and Crazy Mountains	321,701	205,025	69%
Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin, Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains	2,343,529	2,158,640	87%
Pryor Mountains	77,944	75,067	82%
Ashland	501,596	436,133	87%
Sioux	178,625	164,460	92%
National Forest Total	3,423,394	3,039,325	89%

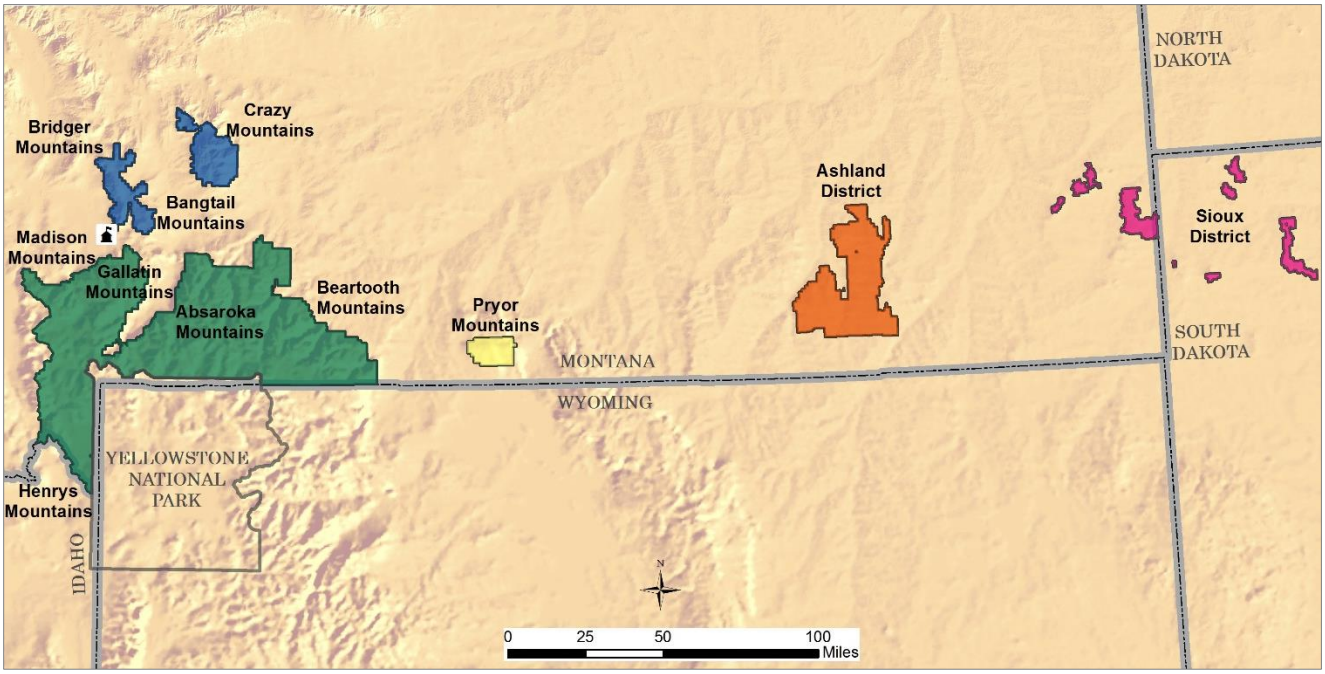

Figure 1. The five landscape areas of the Custer Gallatin National Forest

Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin, Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains

This landscape area is characterized by district mountain ranges dissected by large rivers and creeks. The highlands are composed of alpine ridges, mountain peaks, cirques, moraines, tundra plateaus, coniferous forests, meadows, and foothill grasslands. The Beartooth Mountains contain the highest peaks in Montana and the largest expanse of alpine plateaus in the lower 48 states. Through the valleys flow the Gallatin, Yellowstone, Boulder and Stillwater Rivers, and creek such as East Rosebud, West Rosebud, and Rock Creek. The Custer Gallatin's two designated wilderness areas are found here.

Nearby towns include West Yellowstone, Big Sky, Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley, Gardiner, Cooke City, Livingston, Big Timber, Columbus, and Red Lodge. Public access, numerous recreation facilities and relative proximity to some of Montana's biggest towns (Bozeman and Billings) mean this area is highly visited. The only palladium and platinum mines in the country are located here.

The Madison, Henry Lake, Gallatin, Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains along with the Bangtail, Bridger, and Crazy Mountains, comprise the Custer Gallatin's portion of the Greater Yellowstone Area. While other landscape areas are "islands" of higher elevation public land, this area is bordered to the west and south by other national forests and Yellowstone National Park.

Bangtail, Bridger, and Crazy Mountains

The landscape area is characterized by island mountain ranges in the northwestern part of the national forest. The mountains include alpine ridges, mountain peaks, cirques, moraines, tundra plateaus, coniferous forests, meadows, and foothill grasslands. The Bridger Mountains rise from about 5,000 feet at their western base in the Gallatin Valley to just over 9,600 feet on Sacagawea Peak. The Crazy Mountains rise to over 11,000 feet on Crazy Peak.

The Shields River separates the Bridger and Bangtails from the Crazy Mountains. Land ownership in the Crazy Mountains is a checkerboard pattern of national forest and private sections. Consequently, public access and public facilities such as trails are fewer in the Crazies than the nearby Bridger and Bangtail Mountains. The northern part of the Crazy Mountains lie on the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Nearby towns include Bozeman, Belgrade and Livingston, Montana. Population is growing and recreation use is heavy, particularly in the Bridgers and Bangtails. Both the popular Bridger Bowl Ski Hill and Bohart Nordic Ski Area are located in the Bridgers.

The Bangtail, Bridger, and Crazy Mountains, along with the Madison, Henrys Lake, Gallatin, Absaroka and Beartooth Mountains comprise the Custer Gallatin's portion of the Greater Yellowstone Area.

Pryor Mountains

The Pryor Mountain area is a place of climatic, physiographic, and geologic diversity resulting in exceptional biological diversity. The setting is composed of subalpine meadows and ridges, montane coniferous forests, meadows, foothill grasslands, and semi-desert. Within a relatively short distance of about 20 miles, one can find dramatically different vegetation types from semi-desert to subalpine areas. Because of this unique convergence of three floristic provinces, the Pryor Mountains are considered a "botanical hotspot," rich in species and community diversity. Road access is limited and wild horses may be found in the Pryor Mountains Wildhorse Territory.

Ashland District

The Ashland and Sioux Districts stand out from the surrounding prairie because of their elevation and the ponderosa pines. Vegetation varies from dense stands of pine, green ash hardwood draws, and sagebrush to open, grassy uplands. Sandstone cliffs, ponderosa pines, grasslands, all interspersed by draws and ridges, are typical. The Ashland District has one of the largest district-level grazing programs of any national forest in the country.

The Ashland District is bordered to the east by the Powder River and to the west by the Tongue River. It is dissected by Otter Creek, a tributary to the Tongue River. Nearby towns include Ashland, Colstrip, Lame Deer and Broadus, Montana.

Sioux District

The Sioux District is comprised of eight geographically distinct land units in eastern Montana and western South Dakota. Tree-covered "terrestrial islands" rise above the surrounding prairie. Vegetation includes ponderosa pine, green ash hardwood draws, and open, grassy uplands. Sandstone cliffs

provide dramatic scenery. A transition zone occurs between the eastern edge of the sagebrush distribution and the western edge of the prairie. These sagebrush communities are on the periphery of their distribution.

Most of the Sioux District drains to the Little Missouri, Grande or Moreau Rivers. The national forest land in this area is surrounded by sparsely populated ranchland. Nearby towns include Ekalaka, Montana and Camp Crook and Buffalo, South Dakota.

Public and Tribal Involvement in the Assessment Phase

The Custer Gallatin forest plan revision effort was publicly launched in January 2016 via email announcement, press release and website information. The assessment of existing conditions was initiated with a February 4, 2016 Federal Register notice. In February and March 2016, the forest plan revision team held 15 public meetings to provide an understanding of what forest plan revision is and why it matters, to understand the scope and scale of the Custer Gallatin National Forest as a whole, and to provide an opportunity to gather local knowledge and information, current trends, conditions, perceptions and concerns. Meetings were held in Buffalo, South Dakota, and the Montana communities of Ekalaka, Ashland, Broadus, Colstrip, Billings, Red Lodge, Columbus, Big Timber, Livingston, Gardiner, Cooke City, Bozeman, Big Sky and West Yellowstone. In sum, over 500 people attended these 15 meetings.

A second set of eight public meetings and three webinars were conducted June 14 – 30, 2016. These meetings shared information about results to date on the assessment process and early ideas of the need to change the existing forest plans; they also provided a forum for people to share what they care about and what they want to see from the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Meetings were held in Buffalo, South Dakota, and Ekalaka, Ashland, Red Lodge, Big Timber, Gardiner, Bozeman, and West Yellowstone, Montana.

The Custer Gallatin staff contacted 15 tribal entities, and interacted with a variety of stakeholders including State, local, other Federal entities (including an Intergovernmental Working Group and the Custer Gallatin Working Group) and has met as requested with interest groups.

The Custer Gallatin National Forest made available a questionnaire asking what people think is working well with current national forest management, what changes they would like to see in national forest management and why, and which of the 15 assessment topics are of particular importance and why. The questionnaire also outlined how to submit information and how that information might be used in the assessment.

A total of 131 questionnaires and letters were received in addition to over 1,170 form letters regarding migratory buffalo. Overall, in meetings and from questionnaires and letters, people relayed what they would like to see in the revised plan and changes in current forest management. Themes largely related to degrees and types of multiples uses and recreation and travel opportunities, access, more or less designated areas, along with coordination among agencies, connectivity and the importance of ecosystem health.

The plan revision team reviewed the comments, local information, and published sources submitted by the public and incorporated them where applicable into the assessment process. Each specialist made a determination of what information is the best available scientific information. All public comments received during the assessment phase will also be reviewed and considered during the development of plan components and other plan content.

A *Draft Assessment Report* and twenty five draft in depth topical reports were released for public review on November 30, 2016 and feedback was requested by January 6, 2017. The Forest received about 150 submissions from the public, plus approximately 600 letters asking that bison be identified as a species of conservation concern and a focal species. Reviewers provided feedback that:

- Relayed specific interests and desires for the upcoming revised plan. Forest staff will consider this feedback in developing the revised plan.
- Provided data and citations that can be used in revising the plans. Forest staff will evaluate this information in developing the revised plan.
- Provided relevant feedback that did not lead to changes in the reports, but may be useful to future forest planning efforts (examples; organize the information by landscape instead of topic, pull together all the climate change information instead of distributing it in individual reports).
- Provided relevant feedback that led to changes in the reports (discussed further below).
- Requested that further information be added to the Assessment Report. The Assessment Report was intended as a summary document written for the general public, while the individual resource reports provided more detail. In keeping with the intent to create a summary report, by and large, information that can be found in a specialist report was not added to the Assessment Report.

Changes made between draft and final documents

- The Introduction section of each specialist report summarizes the changes made to that report. A report notes when no changes were made.

- The Final Assessment Report clarifies language and corrects errors. Some new information in specialist reports is added to the Final Assessment Report.

The final Assessment of Existing Conditions and Preliminary Need to Change is available online at: https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/custergallatin/landmanagement/planning/?cid=fseprd520802